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ABSTRACT

Distilling the essential elements of the report "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children," this paper summarizes how reading develops and how reading instruction should proceed. After an introduction and overview, sections of the paper summarize the following: highlights for parents, caregivers, preschool teachers, directors, teachers, and principals in regard to preventing reading difficulties in young children; findings related to teacher education; findings for state and local education agencies; and findings related to students with limited proficiency in English. The paper also illustrates key skills and stages in the development of literacy skills. A series of charts illustrating developmental accomplishments from birth to grade three are attached. (SC)

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ED 460 340

Summary Report of

# PREVENTING READING DIFFICULTIES IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Prepared for US Department of Education Reading Summit

*Washington, DC*
*September 18-19, 1998*

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# PREVENTING READING DIFFICULTIES IN YOUNG CHILDREN

SUMMARY REPORT *for* READING SUMMIT
(Draft)

*Washington, DC*
*September 18-19, 1998*


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## INTRODUCTION

The most recent reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that in the United States four out of every ten fourth graders cannot read proficiently, thus preventing them from reaching high academic standards. For many children, this means that they will face serious educational consequences, and because our society has increased its demands for literacy in the workplace, they will have a difficult time obtaining work.

Therefore, the President has challenged the nation to ensure that every child will be a good, independent reader by the end of third grade. Multiple institutions and organizations must face up to this challenge.

In an effort to determine how, as a nation, we might prevent reading difficulties in young children, the United States Department of Education and Health and Human Services commissioned a study by the National Research Council (NRC). The NRC convened a committee of 17 experts in the field of reading, research, and child development, and they began work.

They undertook a synthesis of the research on early reading development in an effort to develop "an integrated picture of how reading develops and how reading instruction should proceed." (p. vi) After two years of work, the committee issued its Report: PREVENTING READING DIFFICULTIES IN YOUNG CHILDREN. The Report contains specific recommendations about how to prevent reading problems by better educating parents, caregivers, teachers, teacher educators, publishers, the media, and the general public so that children are better served.

The purpose of this summary is to distill the essential elements of the Report. We have tried to organize the information so that educators, parents, caregivers, and others have a reference tool to use. The page numbers indicated in parentheses refer to the pages in the Report to make reference easier. This summary cannot replace the detailed information and research references in the Report. But, each section can remind users of key information, and serve as a roadmap to ensure that their programs and actions are moving in the right directions.

## Overview

Based on a sufficient knowledge base and research about reading, the committee came to a consensus about "how reading develops and how reading instruction should proceed." (p. vi) They agreed that (p. vi)

- Reading should be defined as a process of getting meaning from print.
- Reading requires using knowledge about the written alphabet.
- Reading assumes knowledge about the sound structure of oral language for purposes of achieving understanding.
- Reading instruction should include direct teaching of information about sound-symbol relationships to children who do not know about them.
- Reading instruction must maintain a focus on the communicative purposes and personal value of reading.

They also agreed that the key to preventing reading difficulties is excellent instruction. Effective teachers are those who have the knowledge base to craft a mix of instructional materials and strategies that meet the needs of each child. They found that, "... there is little evidence that children experiencing difficulties learning to read, even those with identifiable learning disabilities, need radically different sorts of supports than children at low risk, although they may need much more intensive support." (p. 3) Thus, the same excellent instruction is necessary and appropriate for all children.

Only those instructional or environmental strategies mentioned in the Report are part of this summary. However, in a few instances we found it necessary to provide examples of good practice. Where possible these examples were taken directly from the Report or elaborated upon based on information in the Report. Where there were no examples given and we felt they would be helpful to practitioners or supervisors, we provided them using other resource materials as indicated.

## HIGHLIGHTS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

*". . . children learn the purposes of literacy in the family setting, although they may differ from family to family." (p. 142)*

When families and caregivers promote the development of language and literacy, fewer children experience reading difficulties when they begin kindergarten and first grade. Research indicates that the following kinds of experiences are important. Children benefit when they:

- ❑ have one-on-one conversations with adults that challenge them with new information and new vocabulary
- ❑ experience a print-rich environment including books and newspapers, writing materials, posters, and magnetic refrigerator letters
- ❑ are read to by adults who demonstrate pleasure in reading and talking about books
- ❑ are given writing materials and are encouraged to use them in many different kinds of play
- ❑ engage in dramatic or pretend play that relates to literacy activities (e.g., making shopping lists, writing prescriptions and notes to grandma, copying a recipe, or pretending to work in an office[1])
- ❑ are encouraged to notice and discuss environmental print
- ❑ see the purpose of literacy by watching adults get information from a book or article, take a phone message, find information on the Internet, or laugh (or cry) as they read a book [2]

[1] Several of the examples in this bullet point were added by the author and are not found in the Report.

[2] Ibid.

*"Excellent preschools can . . . make a difference . . .; excellent . . . implies providing rich opportunities to learn and to practice language and literacy-related skills in a playful and motivating setting." (p. 171)*

**Preschools can make a difference.** The broad focus of preschools should continue to be to provide the best environment for cognitive, social, and language development. At the same time, research indicates that even modest improvements in the kinds of experiences children have in preschool can effect their language development and subsequent ability to learn to read. The Report is very clear, however, that preschool teachers "should not try to replicate the formal reading instruction provided in schools." (p.10)

**The language environment is crucial.** The most effective preschool programs are those with frequent high-quality conversations between teachers and children. In such environments teachers engage children in talking about interesting subjects and new vocabulary is introduced. Some of the conversations are about books that have been read to the group.

**Children can be encouraged to develop increased phonological awareness in preschool.** By increasing children's awareness of the sounds of spoken language, we can reduce young children's risk for future reading difficulties. When children understand that words are made up of sounds (each sound is a phoneme), we say they have "phonemic awareness." Before children can understand that each letter of the alphabet is a symbol for a particular sound or sounds, they must be aware that the words we speak have particular sounds that are grouped together into phonemes (the smallest units of sound) and syllables.

**Children can develop familiarity with letter identification, letter-sound associations, and concepts of print in preschool.** Many activities help children begin to become familiar with the names of the letters of the alphabet and some of the sounds letters make, as well as gain understanding about how print can be used for different purposes.

**Children can use invented spelling to further their knowledge of the sounds of the alphabet and conventional spelling.** Many preschoolers will begin to use recognizable letters in their writing, and as they learn more about sounds, they may use initial consonants as they write. The use of invented spelling is likely to become an even more significant tool for demonstrating knowledge of the sound structure of our language in kindergarten.

**Specific instructional strategies promote the development of reading and writing in young children.** Every preschool classroom should be doing activities that involve children in:

- ❑ exploring rhymes in games, poetry, and songs
- ❑ talking about the parts of words (e.g., *butter-fly*, saying butterfly without the *but*)
- ❑ putting different sounds in categories or grouping words that sound alike (e.g., *top, mop, pop*, but not *can*)
- ❑ talking about beginning, middle, and end sounds in words (e.g., *doe* in *window*, *boat*, without the end sound *t*)
- ❑ talking about print in the classroom, school, and community (e.g., STOP signs, EXIT signs, the M for MacDonald's)
- ❑ exploring the letters and sounds in each other's names
- ❑ exploring books and being read to regularly
- ❑ having conversations about the stories in books
- ❑ hearing and using new vocabulary words as part of their everyday experiences
- ❑ writing, beginning with scribbles and progressing to recognizable letters, and invented spelling

Schools are faced with the task of teaching all children to read and write in kindergarten and the primary grades. Excellent instruction is considered to be the most important prevention strategy for reading difficulties.

**Fostering Literacy in the Kindergarten Classroom**

*". . . the experience a child has during the first year of schooling has lasting impact on school performance." (p. 68)*

The challenge for the kindergarten teacher is to extend children's knowledge and skills about literacy in ways that motivate them to be literate while they see themselves becoming successful learners.

Certain elements should be found in every kindergarten classroom including:

- ❑ oral language activities
- ❑ reading aloud times
- ❑ use of big books, predictable books, and rebus books
- ❑ language experience activities
- ❑ play-based instruction
- ❑ activities to promote knowledge of letters and sounds
- ❑ writing

**Oral language** experiences encourage children to clarify their own ideas and feelings and share their ideas and thoughts with others. In addition to becoming more effective listeners and speakers, they learn how to think and then reason out loud. Children benefit when classrooms are places where time is allocated for challenging conversations about interesting material, whether it is events coming out of classroom interactions (recess problems, rules, sharing materials and supplies), new topics for science or social studies, analysis of new material learned, or questions that lead to new areas for inquiry.[3]

Listening to material **read aloud** is a way to provide reading instruction because it:[4]

- ❑ introduces children to the characteristics of various types of writing
- ❑ extends vocabulary
- ❑ lengthens attention spans
- ❑ creates an atmosphere of pleasure related to language and books
- ❑ provides children with literary models of writing that can influence their own writing

[3] Several of these examples were added by the author and are not found in the Report.
[4] This explanation of the value of reading aloud to children was added by the author and is not found in the Report.

- ❑ helps children become familiar with different story structures
- ❑ allows children to focus on the language and story line without doing the work of reading
- ❑ provides a way to introduce science and social studies topics

During read aloud times children can ask their own questions, respond to questions from classmates, and hear stories repeated. Teachers can call children's attention to particular words and letters in the text as well as punctuation. Activities related to the text—movement, mime, choral reading, and dramatic play—further increases literacy learning.

Another focus of the kindergarten classroom should be "... preparing children to read by themselves." (p.181) This can be addressed using **big books, predictable books, and rebus books.**

**Big books** have enlarged print that make it possible for a group of children to see the writing and the illustrations and thus follow the text. As the teacher reads and points to the words, children follow the text. Over time, children can read and recite along with the teacher to assist in learning about the flow of print and to discuss and discover differences between words, their letters, and their sounds. Repeated words will become recognizable sight words.

**Predictable books** have stories that help emergent readers think about what they are reading by anticipating the words they may encounter on the next page. These books may also repeat certain words or phrases. Children learn how to use their knowledge of the story and picture cues as they focus on the text.

In **rebus books** words or parts of words that may be beyond a child's reading ability are shown with pictures. Often rebus books are used to help children practice reading "frequent function words" (p.182) such as "the," "of," "is," and "are" that are found connecting the pictures.

Another way teachers help children acquire language and literacy skills is by using a variety of **language experience** activities. The theory is to write down what children say and then to help them read what has been written. There are many opportunities in the classroom to use children's talk to promote reading and writing, including writing captions on artwork or block building or creating group stories. Effective teachers use this writing to illustrate such reading concepts as the need to put spaces between words to assist understanding, to demonstrate how to think about the sounds of words, to note that the same words are always spelled the same, and to describe how to show the end of a thought with punctuation.

Children also benefit from **play-based instruction** in which they invent dramatic play scenarios. This kind of sociodramatic play not only increases oral language use and enables children to practice storytelling skills but it offers a challenge for children "to plan, negotiate, compose, and carry out the 'script' of their play." (p. 183) These skills are related to the development of reading comprehension. To have maximum effect, however, children need easy access to the tools of literacy–paper, markers, pencils, stamp pads, phone books, menus, order forms, message pads,

magazines, cookbooks, etc[5]. The teacher must also be available to guide and extend the learning opportunities. Children benefit most when teachers: (p. 184)

- ❑ allow enough time and space for play in the classroom
- ❑ provide the needed material resources
- ❑ develop children's background knowledge for the play setting
- ❑ scaffold the rehearsals of dramatic retellings
- ❑ become involved in play settings so as to guide the children's attention and learning through modeling and interaction

Increasing **letter knowledge** (the ability to distinguish and identify the letters of the alphabet) and **phonological awareness** (understanding that spoken words are composed of smaller units of sound), helps children begin to understand how our alphabetic language works. Kindergartners can be involved in learning these principles in ways that are age appropriate and sensitive to their learning needs. Evidence suggests that skills can be taught effectively using the materials and activities mentioned above rather than through drill based instruction. Many of the activities mentioned above can be used to focus on letter and sound knowledge, as well as:

- ❑ learning poetry and songs that are alliterative or rhyme
- ❑ finding objects in the classroom whose names begin or end with the same sound
- ❑ doing clapping activities to identify the syllables in words
- ❑ analyzing each other's names to make discoveries about letters and sounds[6]
- ❑ making charts about letter/sound discoveries[7]

> A note about "phonics": We have been careful (as has the Report) to minimize the use of the term *phonics* to avoid misunderstandings. According to the Report, phonics refers to "instruction in how the sounds of speech are represented by letters and spellings." (p. 55) A major finding of the Report is that phonemic awareness and phonological awareness are key ingredients in the development of literacy that have not been addressed sufficiently by educators. The report further notes that phonics instruction requires that children already know about the sound composition of words. Therefore, teachers must first increase awareness about the sounds of our language before children can benefit from phonics instruction.

An important vehicle to increase both letter knowledge and phonological awareness is writing. Kindergarten age children benefit from multiple opportunities to use their beginning understanding of letters and sounds to spell words phonetically. Research shows that the use of invented spelling, or spelling words as they sound, actually encourages greater awareness of the

[5] Some of these examples were added by the author and are not found in the Report.

[6] This example was added by the author and is not found in the Report.

[7] Ibid.

smallest units of sound. Teachers can also use children's writing to analyze their phonological awareness and direct their instruction appropriately.

In sum, key components of the kindergarten curricula include activities to:

- ❑ stimulate verbal interaction
- ❑ enrich children's vocabulary
- ❑ talk about books
- ❑ practice the sound structure of words
- ❑ develop knowledge about print
- ❑ recognize and produce letters of the alphabet
- ❑ become familiar with basic purposes and mechanisms of reading

**Fostering Reading in the First-Grade Classroom**

*"The primary job of first-grade teachers is to make sure that all of their students become readers." (p. 194) This is an enormous responsibility. The Report found evidence that "poor instruction in first grade may have long-term effects." (p. 26)*

Effective first-grade teachers build upon the activities described in excellent kindergarten classrooms to further promote the skills required for conventional or "real" reading.

Instruction should be designed to foster: (p. 194)

- ❑ greater awareness and practice with the sound structures of language
- ❑ increased familiarity with spelling-sound relationships and conventional spelling of basic words
- ❑ sight recognition of frequently used words
- ❑ independent reading

These goals can be fostered through many small and large group reading activities, as well as by having children listen to books read aloud. Some small group reading should include the use of texts that are of special interest and easy to read. Other small group reading should include texts that require the support of a teacher. During these reading times there should be planned instruction about reading strategies involving comprehension as well as decoding.

Comprehension strategies would include:

- ❑ summarizing the main idea
- ❑ predicting what will happen next
- ❑ drawing inferences
- ❑ checking whether ideas make sense

Decoding strategies would include:

- ❑ explicit instruction and practice related to the sound structures of letters and words
- ❑ attention to spelling-sound correspondences and common spelling conventions
- ❑ the recognition of frequently used "sight" words

Teachers can encourage children to use picture and context clues to check reading accuracy rather than as a primary decoding strategy.

Continued emphasis on opportunities to write should be apparent in first grade. Because invented spelling encourages the development of phonemic awareness (the small units of sounds in words), this practice should be supported. Correct, or conventional spelling, should be developed at the same time. As key words and spelling patterns are taught, it is reasonable to expect that children gradually begin to spell particular words correctly.

First-grade teachers who are effective in teaching reading design a classroom environment that supports learning.

- ❑ They create a print-rich environment where children have access to a variety of reading and writing materials.
- ❑ They offer many opportunities for reading and writing instruction that are embedded in ongoing reading and writing activities, as well as direct instruction that may not be in the context of ongoing work.
- ❑ They provide many and varied opportunities to read—alone, with a partner, in a small group.
- ❑ They use a variety of carefully chosen reading materials including literature and poetry, big books, and instructional level texts.
- ❑ They offer multiple opportunities to write and link writing to reading.

**Fostering Independent and Productive Reading in the Second- and Third-Grade Classroom**

*"Effective instruction includes artful teaching, a thing that transcends—and often makes up for the limitations of—specific instructional strategies." (p. 224)*

While the challenge of first grade is to decode text and find meaning in it, the challenge of second and third grade is develop the ability to "analyze, critique, abstract, and reflect on text" (p. 210) so that by the fourth grade children can absorb new information efficiently by reading.

In order to be able to "discuss, learn about, and write about the ideas and information encountered in their texts" (p. 211), second and third graders benefit from exposure to a variety of reading materials that engage them in thinking about the text as they gain increased reading fluency. Instructional strategies should include continued attention to making sure children understand

the alphabetic principle ("... that written spellings systematically represent the sounds of spoken words" p. 315), spelling lessons to promote phonemic awareness and letter-sound/sound-letter relationships, particular emphasis on the development comprehension and word recognition skills, and continued practice in writing.

Assessing children's understanding of the alphabetic principle is essential to helping them progress as readers. Typically, children who finish first grade reading independently sustain that level over the summer because they continue to read, while those who did not achieve that level and so read less over the summer, need increased instruction in phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondences in the beginning of second grade.

Spelling instruction supports children in learning or confirming their knowledge about the sound structure of English. Children benefit from:

- ❑ spelling instruction of short, regular words
- ❑ learning the spelling and the meanings of prefixes, suffixes, and word roots
- ❑ learning about spelling patterns

In second grade, such instruction should help children "transfer spelling patterns and word analysis strategies beyond the lesson, into their own reading and writing." (p. 212)

Word recognition and comprehension are the higher level skills that are the main goals of reading at this stage. For normally progressing children, it is usually during the second grade year that reading fluency is first noticed as well as reliable comprehension. Getting meaning from text requires both a literal understanding of the words, as well as being able to answer such questions as: Why am I reading this? How does this information relate to my reasons for so doing? What is the author's point of view? What are the author's assumptions? Do I understand what the author is saying? Do I know where the author is headed? Is the text consistent with what I know? If not, what do I think about that? (p. 216)

The Report concludes that children's word knowledge and reading comprehension can be measurably improved through instruction. (p. 217) In order for vocabulary instruction to go beyond word understanding and thereby aid reading comprehension, drill and practice in isolated words is not enough. Children benefit when they are given not only definitions but "examples of the words' usages in a variety of contexts. . . ." (p. 218) Additional exposure to new words comes from lots of reading. When teachers read aloud to children from books that they may not yet be able to read on their own, children benefit from hearing more advanced words than they would in conversation or from television.

While there seems to be no one definitive way to teach comprehension strategies, "instructional programs focusing on self-questioning and identifying text consistencies were found to be most effective." (p. 220) This seems to require involving children in reading interesting texts, talking about the texts, making predictions, asking questions, summarizing events, and talking about

meaning. As second graders move into short chapter books with a story line, these conversations become more substantive. Of course, increasing linguistic and conceptual knowledge in many areas promotes overall reading comprehension.

Writing in second and third grade continues to be linked to improving reading skills, ". . . as a means of word study and for the purpose of communication." (p. 222) Children use what they are learning about letters, sounds, and spelling patterns as they write. Invented spelling, as a step along the way to conventional spelling, supports this learning. They begin to use the conventions of print (e.g., use of capital letters, punctuation, grammar, as well as spelling). When children have a reason to write and a message to send, they are motivated to consider how to convey their ideas and think about a logical progression.

### Ongoing Staff Development in Schools[8]

*"Simply providing teachers with information about new instructional strategies does not necessarily result in changes in existing teaching behaviors." (p. 292)*

The content, quality, and context of in-service professional development vary greatly across school districts. Without opportunities to continue their learning, teachers are not able to incorporate new information and ideas into their teaching and improve outcomes for children.

There are several constraints on in-service professional development today. (p. 291)

- ❑ Teachers teach all day, have few pupil-free days during the year, and lack opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge on the job.
- ❑ Administrators and other decision makers do not commit the time and resources needed for strong in-service professional development programs.
- ❑ Most professional development opportunities tend to be one time workshops rather than problem-based approaches that are built into teachers' ongoing work with colleagues.

For staff development to make a difference, it must be based on the needs of the teachers in the school and also delivered in the school. (p. 292) In this way knowledge and skill development can be integrated. For in-service education to make a difference in the teaching of reading, it must incorporate certain important components. (p. 292)

- ❑ There is a focus on modeling, coaching, and explicit feedback for the teacher.
- ❑ Teachers are involved in planning and developing the sessions.
- ❑ The goals of the in-service session and the goals of the school are congruent.

[8] Much of this section was prepared by Naomi Karp, Director, National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

- ❑ Teachers have a chance to discuss and reflect on the information and materials presented.
- ❑ Teachers' individual differences in background knowledge and preparation are taken into consideration.
- ❑ Teachers make a commitment to apply the information they have learned in their classroom practice.

Finally, novice teachers benefit when they receive support from mentor teachers who are successful and enthusiastic about teaching reading.

## FINDINGS RELATED TO TEACHER EDUCATION[9]

*". . . teacher preparation for the teaching of reading has not been adequate to bring about the research-based changes in classroom practices that result in success." (p. 289)*

Research tells us that good teacher preparation is the key ingredient to preventing reading difficulties in young children. Competent and qualified teachers need a broad base of knowledge.

- ❑ They must have knowledge about how children develop and learn, what they know, and what they are capable of doing.
- ❑ They must have a range of teaching methods that they can use to meet the individual needs of children.
- ❑ They must be able to identify children's individual strengths and weaknesses and to prepare instructional strategies that will enable each child to make progress.
- ❑ They must understand, master, and integrate the knowledge and concepts in the different content areas that young children study.

### Obstacles in Current Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs have been criticized repeatedly in recent years for many reasons.

- ❑ They lack a solid apprenticeship component.
- ❑ They offer a course-by-course approach that hinders the integration of information.
- ❑ They fail to prepare students to meet the needs of today's highly diverse student populations.
- ❑ They find it difficult to convey effectively complex current knowledge about best classroom practices.
- ❑ They have not been successful in helping new teachers master the skills needed to understand the knowledge base and then use the knowledge to teach those children most in need of instruction.

### What Is Needed in Early Childhood (Preschool) Education Programs

Preschool teachers lay the foundation for learning in the early elementary grades. The quality of instruction they provide can make a big difference in children's development of literacy skills.

Unfortunately, many preschool teacher preparation programs are offered only at the prebaccalaureate level and the course work is not very demanding or interesting. In addition, the field may not attract talented individuals because course work may be in a department of home eco-

[9] Much of this section was prepared by Naomi Karp, Director, National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department fo Education.

nomics rather than in an education department. If that weren't enough, preschool teachers have a status below that of elementary school teachers, both in classrooms and in universities, and this status is reflected in their pay as well. However, "given the cognitive complexity and practical importance of development in early childhood, preschool education could be a very demanding and interesting major course of study . . . ." (p. 279-80)

The Report recommends that preschool teacher preparation programs include specific information related to preventing reading difficulties. Curricula should include information about how to:

- ❑ Provide a range of rich experiences that build large vocabularies and foster reasoning skills in children.
- ❑ Create activities that develop skills in naming objects, learning about relationships and abstract terms, and differentiating between and among meanings of words.
- ❑ Nurture children's listening comprehension skills and their ability to learn new language.
- ❑ Foster children's sense of story and their sensitivity to the sounds of language, including the sounds in words and the sounds associated with letters of the alphabet.
- ❑ Develop children's awareness of concepts of print and written language, including the use of space and directionality (e.g., reading from left to write).
- ❑ Involve children in activities that develop fine motor skills important for writing.
- ❑ Motivate children to want to read.

### What Is Needed in Elementary School Education Programs

While all states do require that pre-service teachers take at least some course work in teaching reading, insufficient time and emphasis is given this subject. Most teachers entering the field do not have the "knowledge and skills necessary to enable them to help all children become successful readers." (p. 283)

In order for elementary school teachers to be able to prevent reading difficulties, they need to be familiar with the types of opportunities that help young children become good readers. The knowledge and skills needed to teach reading effectively should be grouped together as course work, practica, and field work experiences. This should include supervised, relevant, clinical experiences in which students receive on-going guidance and feedback.

There is a substantial body of knowledge that contributes to an understanding of literacy. Simply said, in order to be able to explore with children the many uses and functions of written language, to help children construct an understanding of the sound/symbol function of letters, to promote children's understanding of language and written text, and to motivate children to want to read and write and learn by reading and writing, teachers must have a deep foundation in language and literacy.

They need to have basic understandings in:

- ❑ linguistics and the structure of language, including features of written and oral language
- ❑ how children develop language skills and the milestones of emerging literacy
- ❑ phonological awareness and how this relates to learning about letters as symbols and their sounds
- ❑ how to use a variety of texts, as well as children's own writing, to promote children's reading and writing development
- ❑ how to promote and practice comprehension skills as well as strategies to help children learn to think about what they read
- ❑ risk factors for reading difficulties
- ❑ assessment methods for evaluating individual children's needs
- ❑ effective intervention strategies for those children experiencing difficulties in learning to read

Because the knowledge base on literacy development will continue to expand, new teachers need to learn how to keep current about new developments in the field of teaching reading and how to translate new information into actual lessons and assessment activities for children.

## Findings for States and Local Education Agencies

While the federal government offers leadership, resources, and incentives, in the United States, decisions about education are state and local matters. The Report concludes that states that pursue systemic reform and focus on preventing reading difficulties can provide the leadership needed to districts and schools. Local districts must provide the follow-up to make sure that reading is taught effectively.

States can take actions to positively influence reading education. For example:

- ❑ State guidelines affect the availability and quality of preschool and day care environments available to all children (p. 300) through licensure requirements, accreditation criteria, and health department regulations.[10]
- ❑ State guidelines specify the days and length of days available for instruction.
- ❑ State guidelines provide support services such as libraries, and often new technology.
- ❑ State guidelines offer additional resources to particularly needy schools.
- ❑ State guidelines establish norms for preschool and elementary teacher salaries and benefits.
- ❑ State guidelines act as information clearinghouses related to teaching techniques and materials.
- ❑ State guidelines Encourage the development of curriculum, assessment, and performance standards.
- ❑ State guidelines oversee the institutions that offer pre-service teacher education and license teachers.
- ❑ State guidelines approve a list of alternative textbook choices from which districts, schools, or teachers must choose.

The Report makes specific comments and recommendations about the last three proposed actions.

### Curriculum Standards

While most states are developing standards related to language arts or communication, many do not have separate standards for reading and those that do provide little detail for separate grade levels. Existing standards do not provide ". . . a model that is complete and consistent with the knowledge base reflected in this report. . . ." (p. 301)

### Teaching Capacity

There is much discussion today about the need to raise standards for teachers. Several organizations are working to accomplish this. Thirty-six states have a partnership agreement with the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), an accrediting body for

[10] The specific examples were added by the author of this summary and are not found in the Report.

schools, departments, and colleges of education. Accreditation is now voluntary and less than half of the institutions that prepare teachers apply for it. NCATE provides standards and indicators for teacher education units. The Report notes that NCATE standards do not reflect the current knowledge base, particularly that there is no mention of "sound sense" or "letter sense" in the guidelines related to reading, writing, and oral language. (p. 294)

The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) is another group that helps states work to develop policies related to teacher preparation and licensing. INTASC now has draft standards that discuss early reading. While this draft reflects awareness of some recent research about emergent literacy, it fails to specify important learning about the alphabetic principle.

Another organization developing teaching standards is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). This is a nationwide, voluntary effort in which experienced teachers apply for national certification as experts in different specialties. These standards also may not adequately reflect all the components addressed in the Report. Some states and school districts offer financial incentives to teachers who apply for this certification.[11]

### Textbook Purchasing

Approximately half the states control textbook approval. A reading series that is approved by a few key states can, therefore, influence availability nationwide. "The burden is on states to conduct full appraisal of programs for early reading based on more than the main textbooks." (p. 303) This is the opportunity for states to make sure that all the materials available to teachers and children reflect the principles about preventing reading difficulties noted in the Report. "Ideally, state curriculum standards and textbook adoption would be synchronized." (p. 304) States can require that textbook publishers demonstrate evidence of the effectiveness of their materials.

Local districts may effect reading education as well. For example:

- ❑ Districts can provide teachers with adequate support and assistance to ensure that reading is taught effectively.
- ❑ Districts can oversee changes in reading instruction to make certain that changes are actually implemented.
- ❑ Districts can assess the effectiveness of reading instruction on an ongoing basis to make sure there is continuous improvement.

[11] The specific examples were added by the author of this summary and are not found in the Report.

## Findings Related to Students with Limited Proficiency in English

A potentially influential finding is that learning to speak English should be a priority before being taught to read English. (p. 324) Oral language development provides the foundation in phonological awareness and allows for subsequent learning about the alphabetic structure of English.

While schools have the responsibility to accommodate the linguistic needs of students with limited proficiency in English, students' abilities and needs vary as do the capacities of different communities to support literacy development. The report offers the following guidelines based on research:

- If there are learning materials, instructional guides, and teachers who are proficient in the children's language, then language-minority children "should be taught how to read in their native language while acquiring proficiency in spoken English and then subsequently taught to extend their skills to reading in English." (p. 11, p. 325)
- If the materials or teachers are not available or there are not enough children speaking a particular language to justify the development of a particular language program, then the "priority should be to develop the children's proficiency in spoken English." Formal reading instruction should be postponed "until an adequate level of proficiency in spoken English has been achieved." (p. 11, p. 325)

*"The child's intelligence, as long as it is in the normal range, does not have much of an impact on the ease of learning to read." (p.43)*

Children develop language and literacy skills before they begin formal reading and writing instruction. Reading-related behaviors may start in infancy or with toddlers depending upon the experiences that influence their development. While there is no agreement about the precise chronological or mental age or developmental level that children must reach before they are deemed "ready" to learn to read, there is agreement about the importance of a range of sensory, perceptual, cognitive, and social skills.

Among the age appropriate behaviors of children who become successful readers are: (p. 43)

- ❑ physical dexterity and locomotion
- ❑ categorizing and constructing relationships between physical objects
- ❑ remembering facts and events over time
- ❑ engaging in imaginative play
- ❑ forming social relationships

**Language Development**

Infants are able to perceive the sounds of all human languages and within a short time they are able to distinguish their native language and keep the sounds of different languages separate. They understand words before they can produce many words. The size of a child's vocabulary is linked to early reading ability.

Before the age of two most children have learned something about the syntax of English. The know about the importance of word order, for example, that "Big Bird is tickling Cookie Monster" means something different from "Cookie Monster is tickling Big Bird." (p. 48)

During the preschool years, children begin to appreciate what a word is. They learn to distinguish the word from the object to which it refers. This means they can understand that the word snake is a short word that refers to a long reptile, while caterpillar is a long word that refers to a small larvae.

## Phonological Awareness

In order to read in the English language, children must be able to connect the printed symbols (letters and groups of letters) with particular sounds. This requires an understanding that the language we speak can be separated into syllables and small units of sound known as phonemes. Phonological awareness means an appreciation of the sounds of speech. Children begin to develop phonemic awareness when they recognize that words can be divided into small units of sounds or phonemes. (p. 51) During the preschool years when you hear young children "playing" with words, e.g., *"pancakes, cancakes, canpakes"* (p. 51), making up rhymes, noticing alliteration, e.g., "boy, butterfly" (p. 53), they are developing phonemic awareness. The research indicates that it is not until the age of 5 or 6 that most children are able to segment sounds in such a way as to identify words that begin with a particular phoneme.

Phonological awareness is dependent on the strength of a child's basic language skills. The more language, the more likely that a child will appreciate the sounds of the language. The research is clear that "there is a close relationship between phonemic awareness and reading ability." (p. 54)"Unless and until children have a basic awareness of the phonemic structure of language, asking them for the first sound in the word *boy*, or expecting them to understand that *cap* has three sounds while *camp* has four, is to little avail." (p. 54)

## Literacy Development

When infants are read to regularly, by 8 to 12 months they begin to show progress in reading related behaviors by progressing from grabbing and mouthing books, to working the hinges of book covers, and then to turning the pages, often accompanied by babbling.

In the second and third year, children begin to use understandable speech as they talk about books or "read" their scribbles. Around the age of three, many children begin to scribble drawing-like and then letter-like markings. Children who have been read to may begin to imitate the tones and reading styles of the adults who have read to them and may recite key phrases from books.

Between the ages of 3 and 4, children may experiment with more scribbling and then random strings of letters, and letter-like forms. Some 4 year olds may be able to write words they have seen and use their knowledge of the sounds letters make to invent the spelling of some words, particularly with beginning consonant sounds. Children who have been read to frequently may pretend read favorite books by themselves. During this period, emergent readers and writers are learning about important conventions of print—we read and write from left to right, from the top of the page to the bottom, and that drawing and writing are different.

Typically, we see "real" or conventional reading begin to develop between the ages of 5 and 7. This means children are able to decode unfamiliar text and get some meaning from it. Initially, they continue to pretend read familiar books demonstrating their awareness of proper intonation and the pat-

terns of our language. As they collect more information about reading, including a knowledge of sight words and words they can sound out, they engage in "print-focused emergent readings." (p. 69)

During this same period children's writing also shows great strides. Most have progressed from scribble writing and stringing together nonphonetic letters to planning their writing and being able to read it back even though an adult might not be able to do so. Writing is an important way for children to practice their reading at this stage. "Invented spelling signals an important breakthrough." (p. 70) When children use phonetically based invented spelling, they demonstrate that their gradually accumulating knowledge of letters, sounds, and words makes some sense to them.

### Comprehension

Children who are good readers understand what they are reading. For young children, there seem to be two important areas that effect reading comprehension. The first is background knowledge. To understand what they read, children must have some familiarity with the content they are reading about. Secondly, the greater children's vocabulary, the more likely it is that they will comprehend the text.

### Word Identification

Word identification is the ability to pronounce a word. For skilled readers this begins as a visual process using the forms of letters and then leads to a phonological decoding process which connects the printed letters to the sounds of the language. (p. 65) Skilled readers develop a knowledge of how spelling patterns correspond to word pronunciations and they also have an awareness of how frequently certain words are likely to appear. They use context clues to help them interpret words that can be pronounced differently and have different meanings— "read" pronounced as reed or red."

**Birth to Three-Year-Old Accomplishments (p. 61)**

Recognizes specific books by cover.

Pretends to read books.

Understands that books are handled in particular ways.

Enters into a book-sharing routine with primary caregivers.

Vocalization play in crib gives way to enjoyment of rhyming language, nonsense word play, etc.

Labels objects in books.

Comments on characters in books.

Looks at picture in book and realizes it is a symbol for real object.

Listens to stories.

Requests/commands adult to read or write.

May begin attending to specific print such as letters in names.

Uses increasingly purposive scribbling.

Occasionally seems to distinguish between drawing and writing.

Produces some letter-like forms and scribbles with some features of English writing.

Three- to Four-Year-Old Accomplishments (p. 61)

Knows that alphabet letters are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named.

Recognizes local environmental print.

Knows that it is the print that is read in stories.

Understands that different text forms are used for different functions of print (e.g., list for groceries).

Pays attention to separable and repeating sounds in language (e.g., Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater, Peter Eater).

Uses new vocabulary and grammatical constructions in own speech.

Understands and follows oral directions.

Is sensitive to some sequences of events in stories.

Shows an interest in books and reading.

When being read a story, connects information and events to life experiences.

Questions and comments demonstrate understanding of literal meaning of story being told.

Displays reading and writing attempts, calling attention to self: "Look at my story."

Can identify 10 alphabet letters, especially those from own name.

"Writes" (scribbles) message as part of playful activity.

May begin to attend to beginning or rhyming sound in salient words.

Kindergarten Accomplishments (p. 80)

Know the parts of a book and their functions.

Begins to track print when listening to a familiar text being read or when rereading own writing.

"Reads" familiar texts emergently, i.e., not necessarily verbatim from the print alone.

Recognizes and can name all uppercase and lowercase letters.

Understands that the sequence of letters in a written word represents the sequence of sounds (phonemes) in a spoken word (alphabetic principle).

Learns many, though not all, one-to-one letter sound correspondences.

Recognizes some words by sight, including a few very common ones (a, the, I, my, you, is, are).

Uses new vocabulary and grammatical constructions in own speech.

Makes appropriate switches from oral to written language situations.

Notices when simple sentences fail to make sense.

Connects information and events in texts to life and life to text experiences.

Retells, reenacts, or dramatizes stories or parts of stories.

Listens attentively to books teacher reads to class.

Can name some book titles and authors.

Demonstrates familiarity with a number of types or genres of text (e.g., storybooks, expository texts, poems, newspapers, and everyday print such as signs, notices, labels).

Correctly answers questions about stories read aloud.

Makes predictions based on illustrations or portions of stories.

Demonstrates understanding that spoken words consist of a sequence of phonemes.

Given spoken sets like "dan, dan, den" can identify the first two as being the same and the third as different.

Given spoken sets like "dak, pat, zen" can identify the first two as sharing a same sound.

Given spoken segments can merge them into a meaningful target word.

Given a spoken word can produce another word that rhymes with it.

Independently writes many uppercase and lowercase letters.

Uses phonemic awareness and letter knowledge to spell independently (invented or creative spelling).

Writes (unconventionally) to express own meaning.

Builds a repertoire of some conventionally spelled words.

Shows awareness of distinction between "kid writing" and conventional orthography.

Writes own name (first and last) and the first names of some friends or classmates.

Can write most letters and some words when they are dictated.

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First-Grade Accomplishments (p. 81)

Makes a transition from emergent to "real" reading.

Reads aloud with accuracy and comprehension any text that is appropriately designed for the first half of grade 1.

Accurately decodes orthographically regular, one-syllable words and nonsense words (e.g., sit, zot), using print-sound mappings to sound out unknown words.

Uses letter-sound correspondence knowledge to sound out unknown words when reading text.

Recognizes common irregularly spelled words by sight (have, said, where, two).

Has a reading vocabulary of 300 to 500 words, sight words and easily sounded out words.

Monitors own reading and self-corrects when an incorrectly identified word does not fit with cues provided by the letters in the word or the context surrounding the word.

Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level.

Shows evidence of expanding language repertory, including increasing appropriate use of standard more formal language registers.

Creates own written texts for others to read.

Notices when difficulties are encountered in understanding text.

Reads and understands simple written instructions.

Predicts and justifies what will happen next in stories.

Discusses prior knowledge of topics in expository texts.

Discusses how, why, and what-if questions in sharing nonfiction texts.

Describes new information gained from texts in own words.

Distinguishes whether simple sentences are incomplete or fail to make sense; notices when simple texts fail to make sense.

Can answer simple written comprehension questions based on material read.

Can count the number of syllables in a word.

Can blend or segment the phonemes of most one-syllable words.

Spells correctly three- and four-letter short vowel words.

Composes fairly readable first drafts using appropriate parts of the writing process (some attention to planning, drafting, rereading for meaning, and some self-correction).

Uses invented spelling/phonics-based knowledge to spell independently, when necessary.

Shows spelling consciousness or sensitivity to conventional spelling.

Uses basic punctuation and capitalization.

Produces a variety of types of compositions (e.g., stories, descriptions, journal entries), showing approprate relationships between printed text, illustrations, and other graphics.

Engages in a variety of literary activities voluntarily (e.g., choosing books and stories to read, writing a note to a friend).

Second-Grade Accomplishments (p. 82)

Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level.

Accurately decodes orthographically regular multisyllable words and nonsense words (e.g., capital, Kalamazoo).

Uses knowledge of print-sound mappings to sound out unknown words.

Accurately reads many irregularly spelled words and such spelling patterns as diphthongs, special vowel spellings, and common word endings.

Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level.

Shows evidence of expanding language repertory, including increasing use of more formal language registers.

Reads voluntarily for interest and own purposes.

Rereads sentences when meaning is not clear.

Interprets information from diagrams, charts and graphs.

Recalls facts and details of texts.

Reads nonfiction materials for answers to specific questions or for specific purposes.

Takes part in creative responses to texts such as dramatizations, oral presentations, fantasy play, etc.

Discusses similarities in characters and events across stories.

Connects and compares information across nonfiction selections.

Poses possible answers to how, why and what-if questions.

Correctly spells previously studied words and spelling patterns in own writing.

Represents the complete sound of a word when spelling independently.

Shows sensitivity to using formal language patterns in place of oral language patterns at appropriate spots in own writing (e.g., decontextualizing sentences, conventions for quoted speech, literary language forms, proper verb forms).

Makes reasonable judgments about what to include in written products.

Productively discusses ways to clarify and refine writing of own and others.

With assistance, adds use of conferencing, revision, and editing processes to clarify and refine own writing to the steps of the expected parts of the writing process.

Given organizational help, writes informative well-structured reports.

Attends to spelling, mechanics, and presentation for final products.

Produces a variety of types of compositions (e.g., stories, reports, correspondence).

Third-Grade Accomplishments (p. 83)

Reads aloud with fluency and comprehension any text that is appropriately designed for grade level.

Uses letter-sound correspondence knowledge and structural analysis to decode words.

Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level.

Reads longer fictional selections and chapter books independently.

Takes part in creative responses to texts such as dramatizations, oral presentations, fantasy play, etc.

Can point to or clearly identify specific words or wordings that are causing comprehension difficulties.

Summarizes main points from fiction and nonfiction texts.

In interpreting fiction, discusses underlying theme or message.

Asks how, why, and what-if questions in interpreting nonfiction texts.

In interpreting nonfiction, distinguishes cause and effect, fact and opinion, main idea and supporting details.

Uses information and reasoning to examine bases of hypotheses and opinions.

Infers word meanings from taught roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

Correctly spells previously studied words and spelling patterns in own writing.

Begins to incorporate literacy words and language patterns in own writing (e.g., elaborates descriptions, uses figurative wording).

With some guidance, uses all aspects of the writing process in producing own composition and reports.

Combines information from multiple sources in writing reports.

With assistance, suggests and implements editing and revision to clarify and refine own writing.

Presents and discusses own writing with other students and responds helpfully to other students' compositions.

Independently reviews work for spelling, mechanics, and presentation.

Produces a variety of written works (e.g., literature responses, reports, "published" books, semantic maps) in a variety of formats, including multimedia forms.

## Evaluation of This Summary of the Report

Thank you for taking the time to give us your evaluation of this summary of some material in Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children.

1. Did you find it helpful to have the information of most interest to different audiences organized accordingly? How did this help (or not help) you?

2. Does this summary give you the right amount of information you need to begin to plan your next steps or to communicate effectively with parents, supervisors, or others?

3. Would you like more narrative?

4. What information do you feel you need that is not in this summary?

5. Would you like to make any other comments about this summary?